

Residents: Keep regions together

Hearing on remaps in Covington, N.O.

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Residents from disparate enclaves across southeast Louisiana voiced a common philosophy on post-census redistricting Thursday, telling state lawmakers in separate public forums that they want compact districts that are geographically, if not racially and politically, homogenous.

That view came from white and black voters, Democrats and Republicans, from both shores of Lake Pontchartrain, both banks of the Mississippi River.

The forums in New Orleans and Covington were the first in a series leading up to the March 20 opening of a special session on redistricting. Lawmakers are tasked with redrawing maps for the Legislature, the state school board, Public Service Commission and the U.S. House, which will involve drawing six districts to replace the current seven.

"What does Gentilly have to do with the West Bank?" Gregory Kahn of the French Quarter asked at an evening session on the Dillard University campus. He was referring to state 3rd

Senate District represented by J.P. Morell.

"What does Baton Rouge have in common with New Orleans?" Kahn continued, referring to the possibility of U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond's 2nd Congressional District being redrawn to reach both cities.

A parade of residents in eastern New Orleans voiced fears about being carved up because of population losses and placed into legislative or congressional districts anchored elsewhere in the city or in other parishes.

"We want to be represented by someone who lives and understands our pain," said Joan Heiser, president of the neighborhood association in Lake Forest Estates.

From Uptown, Marshall Hevron bemoaned being one of just four Orleans precincts out of 33 precincts in Cameron Henry's Jefferson Parish-based 82nd House District. Hevron said he intended no criticism of Henry, a Republican, but he noted that two-thirds of the River Bend voters supported President Barack Obama and Democratic Senate candidate Charlie Melancon in the past two elections. In the 29 Jefferson precincts, Republicans John McCain and David Vitter carried supermajorities.

"We're clearly a minority in our own district," Hevron said. "We want to be represented as part of Orleans Parish."

Former state Rep. Peppi Brueneau, a key figure in the last redistricting session in 2001, advocated for Lakeview — also hard hit by population losses — staying together. Though, he added, "We would be willing to reach into Metairie and Bucktown" to pick up additional population.

Both areas are predominately white and trend Republican.

The state's 6th Senate District drew critics in both meetings. The district, represented by Julie Quinn, stretches from Uptown New Orleans, through Metairie and jumps across the lake to St. Tammany and Tangipahoa parishes.

Hammond resident Cecilia Giannobile called the district impractical, though she said Quinn, a Metairie resident, has represented it well. She echoed comments from others who argued that cities and neighborhoods benefit more from a single representative with a unified focus than from multiple representatives who must satisfy constituents from other areas.

Slidell resident John Wells said: "Keep it simple. Keep it straight. North shore districts north of the lake. South shore districts south of the lake. As you're trying to balance it out, please don't split it up."

Lawmakers, representing the Senate and House Governmental Affairs Committees, did not respond to the public comments,

framing the session as simply a way to get input on new maps.

The exercise, always intense, is expected to be contentious this year because of the widespread population shifts, both because of Hurricane Katrina and routine growth in concentrated areas along the Interstate 12 corridor.

The New Orleans region south of the lake stands to lose at least three state House seats and at least one, perhaps two state Senate seats. The north shore, meanwhile, is expected to gain a Senate seat and at least two House seats. The River Region stretching to Baton Rouge has also seen significant population growth.

A handful of residents and some local elected officials deviated from many of the speakers advocating homogeneity.

Dale Benoit of Belle Chasse said he was disappointed to hear talk of differences between adjoining parishes and adjoining neighborhoods.

"I think we all have a lot in common," he said, noting economic development efforts, coastal restoration and hurricane protection. "The levees don't stop at the parish lines. These are the issues that the Legislature deals with. They deal with regional issues."

In the Covington session, Hammond Mayor Mayson Foster mentioned the idea of making Tangipahoa Parish, with a population around 120,000, its own Senate district.